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Wednesday, 24 October 2007, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Tachie-Menson	(Ghana)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Congo	Mr. Biabaroh-Iboro
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Peru	Mr. Voto-Bernales
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Henzab
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Slovakia	Mr. Burian
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir John Sawers
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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07-56078 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Pascoe: The period since the last briefing has seen both Israeli-Palestinian political dialogue and international diplomatic engagement with the Middle East peace process reach their most intensive levels in years. However, there have also been several developments of concern on the ground in the West Bank and a further serious deterioration of the situation in Gaza.

The Quartet offered its strong support for the bilateral talks between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas when it met in New York on 23 September. The Quartet also pledged to support a serious and substantive international meeting and to work toward its success and for implementation of its conclusions. The Quartet met with the League of Arab States Follow-up Committee, underscoring the importance it attaches to the Arab Peace Initiative, to regional engagement in the effort underway and to the ultimate goal of a comprehensive regional peace.

President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have continued their meetings and tasked their teams, led respectively by former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Qurei and current Israeli Vice-Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Livni, to work intensively on a framework document for the international meeting. United States Secretary of State Rice visited the region for several days in mid-October to encourage progress and is expected in the region at least twice more in the coming period. I will attend a Quartet envoys meeting soon, as part of the process of consultations in preparation for the international meeting.

On 24 September, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee met and expressed its support for the reform agenda outlined by Prime Minister Fayad, as well as for the efforts of Quartet Representative Blair. It endorsed the establishment of a multi-donor budget funding arrangement and the holding of an inclusive donor conference.

The Palestinian Authority is rapidly developing its Palestinian Reform and Development Plan, which sets out its budget support and reform and investment priorities for the coming three years. The plan will serve as the basis of the Palestinian Authority's funding package for the donor conference, which is planned to take place in Paris in the period after the international meeting and will be jointly chaired by the Governments of France and Norway and the Quartet Representative.

The Palestinian Authority Government has succeeded in paying public sector salaries and anticipates that all arrears will be paid by the end of the year, but a major fiscal gap for 2008 is anticipated and urgent additional donor support will be needed, if crucial salary payments are not to be interrupted once more. The Government has also secured from Israel permits for around 3,400 family reunions in the West Bank — out of a total of 54,000 pending cases. Israel also released a further 86 Palestinian prisoners. We hope that more confidence-building measures will be forthcoming.

The Palestinian Authority Government continues its efforts to improve law and order but faces challenges, including in its plan to deploy 500 Palestinian Authority security personnel into Nablus. We urge the Palestinian Authority to do everything possible on the security front, in accordance with Phase 1 of the Road Map. We welcome initial steps in that regard and strongly encourage Israel and the Palestinian Authority to enhance cooperation on security, freedom of movement and economic rejuvenation, in close cooperation with the Quartet Representative.

According to the Government of Israel, 24 road blocks in the West Bank and one checkpoint have been removed. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which monitors implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access, reports that the total number of obstacles to movement currently stands at 562, compared with 563 during the previous reporting period.

Socio-economic conditions in the West Bank remain a source of serious concern. Economic activity and humanitarian operations will be seriously affected by the decision of Israel to further restrict access for West Bank residents — including United Nations staff — to East Jerusalem and to the "seam zone" between the barrier and the Green Line. In addition, the announced intention to reduce the number of crossing points for goods from 12 to six, and the imposition of "back to back" transport procedures and new customs regulations, would, if implemented, significantly increase the cost of transportation of humanitarian supplies and result in possibly unsustainable operational obstacles. The United Nations is actively engaged with the Government of Israel to seek a reconsideration of those measures, in view of their impact on essential humanitarian operations.

Construction of the barrier has continued throughout the reporting period in the occupied Palestinian territory, despite the 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Settlement activity continued this month, despite the Quartet's call for "immediate additional steps to meet previous commitments, including under the Road Map". Settlement activity breaches the Fourth Geneva Convention, prejudges final status issues and undermines the political process. It is also a major factor in determining the extent and character of the closure regime and the route of the barrier and consequent hardship for the Palestinian population. Urgent action on an Israeli settlement freeze and the dismantling of settlement outposts is required as part of a genuine effort to resolve the conflict.

The approval by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) this month of an order to confiscate almost 300 acres of Palestinian land in and around East Jerusalem is a matter of great concern. The confiscated land would be used to create an alternative road network, linking the northern and southern West Bank and bypassing Jerusalem. Quartet members received a strong complaint from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) regarding this unacceptable land confiscation, which Palestinians fear would further undermine prospects for territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian State and further cut already heavily restricted Palestinian access to Jerusalem.

The internal Palestinian divide remains. The Palestinian Authority continues to insist that Hamas reverse its measures of the last several months and accept the decisions taken by the President. Hamas continues to reject a return to the status quo ante, while stating that it does not intend its administration of Gaza to be permanent. Hamas has also indicated that it opposes President Abbas's negotiations with Prime Minister Olmert and the international meeting in the absence of an internal Palestinian consensus.

In Gaza, Hamas continues to confiscate weapons and vehicles of clans and rival factions, which sometimes leads to heavy clashes between Hamas forces and forces of other factions or clans. It has appointed personnel to key parts of the administrative apparatus, and it is imposing taxes on smuggled goods. Hamas's efforts to assert military and administrative control over the Strip are accompanied by allegations of human rights abuses. Allegations of abuses have also been made against Palestinian Authority forces in the West Bank. Four Palestinians have been killed and 69 injured in Palestinian violence, mostly in Gaza.

Twenty-seven rockets and 90 mortars were fired by militants in Gaza — some at crossings, others at Israeli civilian population centres. On 7 October, for the first time in over a year, a standard Grad rocket was fired from Gaza, at the city of Netivot. The Government of Israel has stated to the United Nations that weapons continue to be smuggled into Gaza. IDF raids and incursions into West Bank cities have continued, leading to casualties. The IDF claims it has foiled attacks against Israel during the reporting period.

In Israeli-Palestinian violence, 31 Palestinians, including one child, have been killed, and 153 have been injured, including 26 children, while one Israeli has been killed and six injured. Two hundred Palestinians have been detained by the IDF. One of the approximately 11,000 Palestinian prisoners remaining in Israeli jails died after injuries sustained when prison guards put down a prison riot in circumstances that are not yet clear. IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit is in his seventeenth month of captivity in Gaza.

The Secretary-General continues to condemn all acts of terrorism, as well as all military acts which target, endanger or harm civilians, because of their disproportionate or indiscriminate character.

Members of the Council will recall Israel's decision last month to designate Gaza a hostile territory, to restrict the passage of goods, to reduce the supply of fuel and electricity and to place new restrictions on movement of people to and from the Gaza Strip. The Secretary-General expressed his deep concern at this decision and called on Israel to reconsider it, warning against any measures of punishment of the population.

While the Israeli cabinet decision stated that Israel would take into account "both the humanitarian aspects ... and the intention to avoid a humanitarian crisis", the humanitarian situation in Gaza is deteriorating alarmingly. In June and July, approximately 100 truckloads of humanitarian goods were entering Gaza daily; today, the number is approximately 50. Reversing a previous trend, food prices have jumped by almost 10 per cent in two months, even as poverty levels increase. Many businesses and tens of thousands of workers have lost income with the loss of materials and markets due to closures.

In July, an average of 40 critical medical cases a day crossed Erez into Israel for essential medical treatment unavailable in Gaza; in the last month, the daily average was five. According to Human Rights Watch, at least three patients that were denied exit permits have died since June, and others have lost limbs or sight due to untreated injuries and disease. Hospitals in Gaza briefly ceased conducting operations in recent days citing a lack of nitrous oxide.

Over 1,000 Palestinians remain stranded in Egypt, unable to cross into Gaza with the closure of Rafah for over four months. Over 7,000 Gaza Palestinians who study or work abroad have not been allowed to leave the Strip. Cash transfers from banks in the West Bank will be subject to new restrictions.

We are also concerned that one of the two crossings that remain open for humanitarian goods, Sufa, is slated to be closed towards the end of this month. Since mid-June, 5,936 trucks have gone through Sufa, compared with 1,654 through Kerem Shalom, the crossing that will remain open. While it has been upgraded, Kerem Shalom is unlikely to have the capacity to process the number of trucks required to meet the humanitarian needs of the population of Gaza.

It is difficult to see how security concerns can justify the hardship that these measures are causing. I repeat the Secretary-General's strong injunction against the punishing of the civilian population of the Gaza Strip. We also reiterate the Quartet's urgent concern about the continued closure of Gaza and its calls for continued emergency and humanitarian assistance without obstruction and the provision of essential services.

I turn to the situation in Lebanon, which is currently in the midst of presidential elections. On 25 September Speaker Berri attempted to convene parliament for a vote on a new president. The session never opened, however, due to a lack of quorum. The same day, Speaker Berri issued a call to convene parliament for a vote on the president on 23 October. However, on 22 October he postponed the scheduled session until 12 November. The election of a new president is an important milestone in reasserting Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence. It is essential that the new president be elected in accordance with the constitutional timeframe and procedures and without foreign interference.

The situation within Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon remains precarious, with occasional armed clashes between Palestinian militias. Most recently, on 3 October, two people were wounded in night-time gunfire between armed supporters of Fatah and those of Hamas in the Miyah Miyah refugee camp near Sidon. Tangible improvements in living conditions inside these camps are urgently needed, given the obvious connection to the wider security situation in Lebanon. The United Nations family stands ready to work with our Lebanese and Palestinian partners towards this goal.

The United Nations country team in Lebanon is actively engaged in supporting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East efforts to implement an emergency return plan funded by a new flash appeal launched jointly with the Prime Minister and the World Bank at a donor meeting held in Beirut on 10 September 2007. I urge donors to continue to provide vital financial assistance for urgent humanitarian needs and for the reconstruction of the camp.

During the reporting period, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) reported 142 overflights of Lebanese territory by Israeli planes and unmanned aerial vehicles. These overflights occurred on an almost daily basis. Some of them were at a low altitude, breaking the sound barrier in populated areas in southern Lebanon. Overflights not only constitute serious violations of Security Council resolutions, but they also undermine the credibility of both UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces in the eyes of the local population and damage efforts to reduce tension, build confidence and stabilize the situation in southern Lebanon. At the same time, Israel continues to state that its air violations are to counter other breaches of resolution 1701 (2006), including violations of the arms embargo.

The Secretary-General has asked me to convey to the Council his strong backing of the current diplomatic efforts. He remains committed to the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace with Israel, and a comprehensive peace in the region, in accordance with Security Council resolutions, the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative.

To this end, the Secretary-General hopes for an international meeting that deals with the substance of permanent peace, has broad Arab participation, produces results that positively affect the lives of Israelis and Palestinians and leads to a serious follow-on process. He therefore encourages the parties to be bold in reaching understandings on core issues and on a clear process following the international meeting. And he calls for urgent efforts by the parties to build confidence and to improve the situation on the ground by taking further steps in accordance with the Agreement on Movement and Access and Phase I of the Road Map. All of the relevant international actors should help the parties take such steps. A failure of this process would be a major setback with wide-ranging consequences.

The Secretary-General remains deeply concerned for the welfare of the civilian population of Gaza and reiterates the commitment of the entire United Nations system to do its part to meet their needs. The Secretary-General regrets the continued division of the occupied Palestinian territory and fears that that will become harder to overcome the longer it is left unaddressed. He hopes that the concerned parties and regional and international players will address the situation in Gaza with wisdom, foresight and a sense of responsibility.

Finally, I would like to inform the Council that the Deputy Special Coordinator and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Kevin Kennedy, resigned from the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) at the end of last month. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I thank Mr. Kennedy for his outstanding contribution to the work of UNSCO and the entire United Nations system on the ground, which was the culmination of a distinguished career leading United Nations efforts in many complex emergencies and supporting those efforts in senior leadership positions at Headquarters. He is sorely missed, and we wish him well. The Secretary-General is moving quickly to fill both the Special Coordinator and Deputy positions. He will ensure that, pending long-term appointments, arrangements are in place for leadership of the United Nations country team at this critical time.

The President: I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.